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# Returnee Immigrants and the Founding of the Seventh-day Adventism in Europe

## Introduction

The beginning of the Seventh-day Adventist mission in Europe is directly connected to returnee immigrants. Those returnee immigrants were former settlers of the New World who left Europe for America and eventually became Adventists. After their conversion, some became missionaries to their home countries and other areas in Europe. It is in this context that the contributions of Michal B. Czechowski, Ludwig R. Conradi, Jan G. Mattesson, and Jakob Erzberger to Adventist mission in Europe are well known. However, there are other relatively unknown figures—also returnee immigrants—whose missionary efforts also played a key role in the founding and establishment of Adventism in Europe. This article will focus on three of these lesser known individuals: Conrad Lubahn, Julius Theodor Böttcher, and Reinhold Klingbeil.

This article will look at the background for the large European emigration to the United States, followed by briefly tracing the relationship of German immigrants and the early Adventist years. Then brief accounts of the individual missionary mission contributions of Lubahn, Böttcher and Klingbeil in Europe will be highlighted.

## European Immigration and Religion

Many Europeans became settlers in America in the 1800s. As a result of land and job shortages, rising taxes, crop failures, and famine, many Europeans left their home countries and were forced to flee to the United States, which was perceived as the land of economic opportunity.

America, the New World, received its largest number of immigrants from Europe between 1870 and 1900. According to the United States statistics, 12 million immigrants arrived during this time (Library of Congress n.d.). The immigrants came from Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Scandinavia, and from southern and eastern Europe. These new immigrants became vital forces of American life, bring innovation and of course their religious heritage and practices.

“Jews, Protestants, and even some Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists arrived in the successive waves of massive immigration to the United States between the 1840s and 1920s” (Byrne 2000). With the steady stream of immigrants from Europe, Protestantism in the United States changed from a tight-knit group of educated aristocrats who owned land into a diverse mass of urban and rural immigrants. They came from different countries, spoke various languages, held a variety of social statuses, and placed emphasis on distinct aspects of their Christian heritage.

By emphasizing different doctrinal aspects of their Christian heritage the various immigrant groups maintained their ethno-religious identity in their new settlements. This helped them adjust and survive in their new environment (Yang and Ebaugh 2001). However, since many Europeans went to the US for the sake of religious freedom, it was easier to join new religious groups that were emerging because of the waves of religious revivals that swept over North America in the 1800s. The Second Great Awakening took place between 1790 and 1840 and resulted in many of the immigrants joining new denomination. Of special interest to Seventh-day Adventists is the Millerite revival of the 1830 that was led by a Baptist preacher—William Miller (1782-1849) and which had a number of European settlers among its adherents. The Seventh-day Adventist denomination, which grew out of the Millerite Movement, had a number of German-speaking converts join its movement in the early years of the denomination.

### **German Emigration to the United States**

The case of German immigrants to the United States is of particular interest for this article. Historically, Germans were the largest immigrant group entering the USA. They began migrating to the US as early as 1683 (Lüber 2018). After the start of industrialization, the German population began to grow exponentially. By the mid-19th century, a number of farmers in Germany could no longer eke out a living as a result of land scarcity. Thus, they began migrating in 1816 to the United States. In the US, they were exposed to better opportunities such that a peasant farmer who barely had half a hectare of land in Germany could secure about 64 hectares after ten years.

In addition to access to cheap land, politically the US seemed to be “the land of the free.” After the revolution of 1848 in Germany, many people realized that the common person was very unlikely to experience much freedom. This was especially true for those belonging to the left-wing liberal class; therefore, emigration to the US, a democratic nation, became the best option around 1848. This resulted in the so called “48ers” (Lüber 2018).

There were other reasons why so many Germans moved to the US. Some, like the Volga Germans (or Beresan German-Russians) who had settled in Russia, were attracted to the prairies in the US, which were unlike the semi-arid steppes of Russia. Additionally, many Volga Germans fled to the US after 1871 when Czar Alexander II “decreed that both the Volga and the Beresan German-Russian colonies would be forced to conform to Russian laws in an attempt to create a unified Russian identity” (Mans 2019). This most likely was the case of Conrad Laubhan (1838-1923) and his wife, Katherine Sophia Meier (1842-1929), who emigrated to America in 1878.

Others emigrated due to personal reasons or because of familial contacts they maintained with relatives. For instance, Julius Theodor Böttcher (1865-1931) emigrated to the US after the loss of his parents in 1879 and 1880 respectively. His move was made possible because his sister, Mary Just was living in Minnesota at that time. In the case of Reinhold Gustav Klingbeil (1868-1928), he emigrated to the US in 1876 together with his family. Whatever the case, these individuals became Adventists in the US and later became missionaries in Europe.

### **Conradi: Mission, Conversion, and Ministerial Motivation among European Migrants**

It is interesting that aside from the fact that Böttcher and the Laubhan and Klingbeil families moved to the US during the same period, all of them either became Adventists through the ministry of Ludwig Richard Conradi or were motivated to join the Adventist ministry and mission work through Conradi’s efforts. Conradi needs no introduction in the history of Adventist mission. Born in Karlsruhe, Germany, he had migrated to America as a young man. In 1878, he became an Adventist. The next year, after meeting with Ellen White, he attended Battle Creek College. In 1886, he was sent to work in Europe where his mission work in adapting and contextualizing Adventism among Europeans gave Adventism its needed boost and growth. He led European Adventism for a number of years until he left the Adventist Church 1932 (Heinz 1998).

Before returning to Europe, Conradi began working among German-speaking people in the Mid-West after his studies at Battle Creek College. The fact that Adventist mission was being carried out among German-speaking immigrants is surprising for that time period. Many of the Adventists who survived the “Great Disappointment” of 1844 were not willing to tell non-Millerites about the Second Coming. They argued that the door of grace had been shut on those who had not accepted the Millerite message. Yet, in 1849 and from the 1850s onwards, this view changed. Early Adventists began evangelizing among North American immigrants. Eventually, when the Adventist leaders became more open to the necessity of world missions, Uriah Smith argued that since the United States received many immigrants from among the peoples of the world, the mission of the Adventist Church could be fulfilled by never leaving America (Schantz 1983:233). In this vein several European immigrants in the USA engaged in mission to their own people. Additionally, training institutes like German institutes and Scandinavian institutes were organized for the various language groups.

As these immigrants became Adventists, they wanted to tell their relatives back home in Europe about the imminent return of Christ. Thus, magazines were printed in foreign languages and shipped to Europe. For instance, the Danish paper, *Advent Tidende*, from 1872 onwards, and other magazines in French, German, Norwegian, and Swedish were sent to Europe. It was in this context that Conradi began working among Germans in the US. Soon, in 1882, Conradi was ordained to the Adventist ministry. His ministry focused on German-speaking people who were largely recent immigrants.

### **Lubhan, Böttcher and Klingbeil: Background, Conversion, and Mission**

After Laubhan (born on April 22, 1838) and Katherine Sophia Meier (born on February 4, 1842) married on January 3, 1861, they had ten children. All of them died in infancy except one, who became Mrs. Richards (Obituaries 1923:7; Obituaries 1929:7). In 1878 Laubhan and Katherine Meier emigrated to America and settled in Kansas. While in Kansas they became Seventh-day Adventists through the ministry of Conradi. From then on, the couple began working as Adventist lay workers until they were called to Europe.

In the case of Klingbeil (born on September 7, 1868), at the age of seven, in 1876, his family moved to America, and settled in Wisconsin. In 1887, he was baptized as an Adventist. However, his life soon took another direction after he met Conradi who encouraged him to pursue a five-month

course in pastoral/missionary training in 1893 at Union College in College View, Nebraska. It was after his training that Klingbeil received an invitation to minister back in Europe.

For Böttcher (born on April 8, 1865), after settling with his sister in Minnesota at the beginning of the 1880s, he became an Adventist through an evangelistic series in Minnesota that was conducted by W. B. Hill in 1885. Immediately after, Böttcher wanted to share the Advent message with others as well. He went to Battle Creek College in Michigan where he did his training in the German Department led by August Kunz (Voth 193:28). By 1887, Böttcher was already working as a lay pastor in Ohio under the Cleveland mission (*Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* 1888:64). In the winter of 1888 and 1889, after attending a training institute with his wife, Nellie Loreana (born October 19, 1864), they both accepted a call to go to Germany to work under the leadership of Conradi. It is interesting that the General Conference had earlier called for J. S. Shrock to go to Germany. However, Shrock declined, and in his stead, Böttcher was recommended (Synopsis of the Proceedings of the General Conference Committee 1889:235).

Having established the connections between Conradi, Adventist mission, and German settlers in the US, the next sections offer more details concerning these three returnee immigrants and their contributions to Seventh-day Adventist mission in Europe.

#### Laubhan: Pioneer Mission Work in Russia

As early as 1883, Volga Germans in Crimea were already receiving Adventist literature sent from a German residing in Kansas (*Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* 1890:62). As a result, the Crimean Germans began corresponding with the Adventist leaders in America. In 1886, after Conradi had organized a church in Crimea, Laubhan and his wife Katherine were sent to Russia to begin pioneer mission work (Conradi 1889:582). The couple settled in Saratov, on the Volga, and began their ministry in a familiar environment. The next year Laubhan was ordained to the gospel ministry and by 1888, just two years after the launch of pioneer mission work, there were more than 100 Adventists in the south of Saratov. Additionally, from the spring of 1888 onwards, Laubhan was instrumental in organizing about five churches. Laubhan and Katherine also met with a number of Russian Sabbath keepers, which was an advantage to his ministry as he built on and contextualized the Sabbath theology in order to bring Adventist teachings into perspective (Wogu 2021a).

The Laubhans were very successful in their mission in Crimea, such that Conradi reported that the number of Adventists increased to about

300 partially due to the work done by the couple (1889:582). However, after twelve years of mission work, Laubhan's health failed and the family returned to the USA (Wogu 2021a). Laubhan died on April 4, 1923 and his wife Katherine died on July 12, 1929 (Obituaries 1929:7). Yet their mission contributions and the legacy they left behind survived them.

### Böttcher: Pioneer Mission Work in Germany, Switzerland, and Russia

When the Böttchers arrived in Hamburg in the winter of 1888/89, they immediately joined Jakob Erzberger and Conradi in organizing several evangelistic series. They were quite successful. For example, the evangelistic lectures held in the city of Barmen where Erzberger and Böttcher preached generated interest among the attendees concerning the Adventist message. The next year, in 1890, Böttcher was ordained and by 1892, he was already leading the mission in Hamburg. However, 1892 was not an easy year in Germany and it was also the year of the cholera outbreak in Hamburg. There were many difficulties of doing mission during that time, yet Böttcher took the reins of leadership with courage.

From 1892 onwards, Böttcher became an instrumental force in the pioneering work of Adventist mission in Germany. This is captured in how Böttcher was ready to join efforts with others when it came to evangelism (Wogu 2021b).

In June 1893, Böttcher and Johann G. Obländer held a tent meeting in Schleswig, Germany. Since this was the first tent meeting ever held in Germany, several people came merely out of curiosity. Nevertheless, a number took an interest in the Advent message, leading to the organization of a church there. Another church was organized at Harburg, five miles from Hamburg, after some lectures by Emil Frauchiger and Böttcher. Emil Frauchiger was the one principally working in that area, but because Böttcher was in charge of the mission in Hamburg, he joined efforts with Frauchiger. Hence, Böttcher was an instrumental element in the founding years of Adventism in Germany. (Wogu 2021b)

Böttcher not only worked in Germany, but also in Switzerland and Russia. He was one of the early Adventist cross-cultural missionaries. After the Böttchers returned to the United States in 1894, they worked in Minnesota and Ohio as evangelists. However, because of their missionary experiences, Böttcher was appointed to teach at Union College in Nebraska. There, he led the German Department for about seven years. During this time, he trained workers who were preparing for cross-cultural mission work outside the United States (Voth 1931:28).

It is not surprising that Böttchers later returned to Europe as missionaries. This time, they went to Switzerland where he served as president of the newly organized German-Swiss Conference in Basel, while his wife Nellie began working as a matron in the Basel and Gland sanitariums. While leading the administration, Böttcher not only facilitated evangelistic lectures, colporteur work, and Bible studies, he “also led out in the organization and reorganization of several churches that contributed to the already formed foundation of the Adventist denomination among German-speaking Swiss people” (Wogu 2021b).

Böttcher later served as the president of the South German Conference from 1905 to 1907 before moving to Russia to head the newly created Russian Union Conference. Working as a mission administrator in Russia was difficult as a result of the lack of religious freedom. In spite of the dangers and difficulties, Böttcher’s passion was focused on the spread of the Seventh-day Adventist message as well as in training indigenous workers. In his zeal, he facilitated numerous public evangelistic meetings, led out in the recruitment of colporteurs, ensured the opening and organization of new fields (Böttcher 1909:12; Wogu 2021b), and the establishment of local churches in the vast Russian territory (Böttcher 1908:13, 14).

At the turn of the 20th century, Böttcher became an important figure in the history of European Adventism. In 1911, he was elected as vice president of the European field, a position he held until he returned to the US in 1916. Before his death in January 1931, Böttcher worked with the German Department of the Bureau of Home Missions where he coordinated the employment of workers and organized churches, education, and publishing among the German population in North America (Böttcher 1922:13; Wogu 2021b).

### Klingbeil and the Dutch-Belgian Adventist Mission Work

Immediately after his pastoral training at Union College, Klingbeil, the youngest of the missionaries under consideration, first went to Germany as an evangelist and colporteur. This was after he accepted an invitation to work in Europe. In Germany, he requested to work around Magdeburg (Wogu 2021c). While the twenty-five year old was busy holding Bible studies and public lectures, the Foreign Missions Board had recommended Klingbeil as the best candidate to commence mission work among Germans in Holland (*Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* 1893:70).

In Holland, Klingbeil began working among the Germans in Rotterdam and among the Sabbatarian Christians he came in contact with (Conradi 1894: 282). In Rotterdam, Klingbeil preached and sold books to the sailors. In addition, he was instrumental in establishing Adventist



Churches in Amsterdam, Zwolle, and the Hague. As a result, the Dutch Church grew to about 240 baptized members (Wogu 2021c). In January 1902 when the Dutch field was organized into a conference, Klingbeil was elected as president (Conradi 1902:148).

Klingbeil's success in the Dutch field was also replicated in the Belgian field. In 1903, Klingbeil was sent to Belgium to begin pioneer mission work. The country was firmly steeped in Roman Catholicism and the state Protestant Churches. This created several challenges for Klingbeil. Once, the contract for a rented hall, which he used for his evangelistic lectures, was withdrawn because of threats from the Catholics. This did not deter Klingbeil as he resorted to using the large room in front of his house for public evangelistic meetings (Wogu 2021c).

According to a report by Arthur G. Daniells, then president of the General Conference, after Klingbeil transferred the services to his house,

one of the priests in that part of the city stirred up the people to mob the place. One Sunday night hundreds of angry people gathered in front of the house to break up the meeting, but they did not succeed. They seemed to be restrained by some unseen power. This demonstration caused many people to make inquiry regarding the things Brother Klingbeil was teaching, and in the end really proved a blessing to his work. (Daniells 1905:6)

After the incident, Klingbeil continued his meetings without interruption. He pioneered Adventism in Antwerp and further in Brussels where he trained Bible workers, and established churches. Klingbeil continued working in Belgium and in Holland alternatively. For instance, in 1909 he worked in Holland, then in 1911, he returned to Belgium. Then in 1919, he came back to Holland to lead the West Holland Mission until 1923. From 1923 to 1926 he led the mission in Belgium as the president of the conference there. In 1926, Klingbeil returned to the US with his family. He began pastoring a congregation in Michigan but died suddenly after a heart failure on April 27, 1928 (Piper 1928:22).

### **Lubhan, Böttcher, and Klingbeil: Appraising the Contributions of Returnee Immigrants in Europe**

The three individuals and their wives discussed above played a significant role in the founding years of Adventism in Europe. They were not the first missionaries to have entered Europe; however, their crucial roles as pioneer missionaries in both unentered and entered regions in



Europe gave Adventism a needed boost in those early years. In the case of Conrad Lubahn and Katherin Sophia who worked as pioneers in Russia, in a eulogy, J. N. Anderson, commented that “In common with many other non-conformists,” Laubhan

preached a faith that was under the ban of the government, and he paid dearly for persisting in preaching his message in the face of officers of the law whose studied purpose it was to silence his voice of truth. Many a time was he compelled to flee in the dead of night lest he be apprehended and cast into prison. Much of his most effective work was done under cover of the darkness. . . . He was known here as a quiet, consistent Christian. He passed away in full faith, trusting in the great Father of life who will in that day call all His sleeping ones. (Anderson 1923:22)

Heinrich J. Löbsack recognized the efforts of Laubhan in Russia and its reverberations in Eastern Europe. According to Löbsack, it was from the earliest endeavors of Laubhan that the Adventist message spread in Russia. Local ministers and colporteurs were trained. Churches, conferences, and union conferences were established all throughout Russia and Central and Northern Asia (1929:8).

The lives of Julius and Nellie Böttcher portray the stark commitment of a husband and wife who served their denomination in mission. Their efforts as pioneer missionaries contributed to the founding years of Seventh-day Adventism in Germany, in some cities in Switzerland, and to what was then the Russian Empire.

Reinhold Gustav Klingbeil the youngest of the three missionaries, served the Seventh-day Adventist church as evangelist, pastor, missionary, and administrator from 1893 to 1928. In his thirty-five years of mission and ministry, he played a key role in the establishment of Adventism in some parts of Europe, especially in the Netherlands and Belgium. In those two countries, he was instrumental in founding several congregations. As mission administrator, he trained and mentored Dutch and Belgian workers whose later took over the affairs of the Adventist Church in their regions. His approach to mission in difficult situations remains a cherished memory during those founding years of Adventism in Europe.

## Conclusion

This article demonstrated that aside from the popular names like Czechowski, Conradi, Matteson, and Erzberger, other returnee immigrants like Lubahn, Böttcher, and Klingbeil were instrumental in the

founding years of Adventist mission in Europe. It is interesting to note that all three individuals had emigrated to the US in approximately the same time period and either met or worked with Conradi. Conradi was instrumental in the conversion of Lubhan, encouraged Klingbeil to do ministerial training, and was the first contact Böttcher had when he returned to Germany as a missionary.

What is more interesting is that the three returnee immigrants had an advantage over home workers. Having lived in the United States for some time, they gained much-needed cross-cultural experience that must have helped them adapt Adventism to the European context. This claim comes in the view of the fact that some Adventist workers have been criticized for transplanting Adventism to Europe without taking note of the context. For instance, Czechowski, John N. Andrews, and Jakob Erzberger have come under some disapproval for adopting the method of American evangelism while doing Adventist mission in Europe (Pfeiffer 1978:19-25; Heinz 2010:51-62). Nevertheless, as demonstrated in this article, Laubhan, Böttcher, and Klingbeil were sensitive to their various contexts. Laubhan for instance contextualized Adventism through Sabbath theology among Russian Sabbath keepers. In the case of Böttcher, who worked in several fields, he focused not only on doing contextualizing Adventism but also on training indigenous Adventist workers for the denomination in the regions where he worked. Klingbeil adapted Adventism in the Dutch context such that he was successful among German settlers there.

By the time all three missionaries left the European context, Adventism was well established in Europe such that European Adventism competed in several instances with American Adventism. That competition was very visible at least in numbers. While numbers are not the best criteria to rate success, numbers are very tangible and quantitative. Nonetheless, the account above does not claim finality to the story of the early Adventist mission enterprise in Europe. Hence, what is left untouched in this article can be summed up in several questions that could guide future research. Which other returnee immigrants contributed to the founding of Adventism in Europe? What challenges did those missionaries face in spite of their cross-cultural advantage? Were these missionaries always successful? Finally, why did most of these missionaries return to the United States even when they worked in their birth countries?

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